

Luther and *Beneficia*

Risto Saarinen

In *Recultivating the Vineyard*, Scott Hendrix creates a fruitful metaphor for the understanding of a significant Reformation agenda: Christianity should be reformed and cultivated so that its original roots can flourish in the fertile soil. In the following, I will apply this agenda to the much-discussed problem of the proper exchange of gifts and services. As Natalie Zemon Davis shows in her insightful book *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France*,¹ European people in the era of the Reformation had a sophisticated understanding concerning gifts and sales as well as their social meanings. When gifts and services begin to be understood in terms of monetary economy, they easily go wrong and spoil the social culture based on trust and gratitude. In order that this culture can be rediscovered and recultivated, a strong paradigm of gift-giving needs to be established. For Luther, this paradigm is a theological one and entails a Christianization of social culture in terms of altruistic gifts and services. The many-sided but nevertheless coherent concept of *beneficia* provides a lense through which Luther's theological programme can be approached.

Reformation scholars have often recognized the importance of the concept of *beneficia* for the Lutheran Reformation. Philip Melanchthon's well-known programmatic assertion in the first edition of his *Loci communes* states that knowing Christ means knowing his *beneficia*.² Martin Luther employs this concept abundantly, relating it to different contexts. The sacrament of the altar is God's gift and *beneficium*, not a sacrifice³. Both the spiritual realm of the church and the political authority can be understood as God's *beneficia*.⁴ Justification occurs on the basis of *beneficia Christi*, but the creation in its totality is also full of God's *beneficia*.⁵

Because the Latin word *beneficium* can be employed in different contexts, one may receive the impression that the term does not have a consistent meaning but it covers all kinds of advantageous and beneficial works as well as favorable attitudes. I will argue, however, that Luther's use of the term presupposes a consistent theological concept. The meaning of this concept can be grasped when we go through Luther's use of *beneficia* in detail. I will focus on the Latin word *beneficia* and its German translation *Wohltaten*, in Luther's spelling, *wolthaten*.

While *Wohltaten* remains the standard German translation of *beneficia*, it is difficult to

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

² Melanchthon, *Loci communes 1521, Lateinisch-Deutsch*, ed. H. G. Pöhlmann, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1993), 22, 13. One can also observe a certain hesitation regarding the usefulness of this concept. According to Pöhlmann, *Loci*, 21-22, Melanchthon takes over this concept from Erasmus. Oswald Bayer, *Zugesagte Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 158, labels Albrecht Ritschl's liberal Protestantism as "Beneficia-Christologie".

³ WA 29, 185, 17-30; 40/2, 194a, 25-26. See 2. below.

⁴ WA 13, 202, 35; WA 31/2, 613, 22-24 and 645, 30-32.

⁵ WA 40/2, 289, 12; 42, 33, 8. See also 3. below. *Sachregister zu WA*, entries *beneficium*, *benefacio* contains abundant material to all these topics.

give a workable English translation. “Good works” is too broad and “benefits” too narrow; also, these translations have misleading connotations. Some contemporary scholars translate *beneficia* as “gifts and services”, others as “favors”.⁶ I will often use favors, because this term conveys adequately both the required attitude and the actual deed. Two problems with this translation should, however, be noted: 1. it partially overlaps with the Latin word *favor*, meaning approval or favorable attitude; 2. *beneficia* do not mean small acts of politeness but they are deeds of significant benevolence which manifest the fundamental intention of the agent.⁷ To avoid misleading connotations, I will often retain the Latin word or use longer expressions, for instance, “beneficial agency”.

The so-called *beneficia* are extensively discussed in ancient and medieval philosophical, legal and theological texts in which this term sometimes has technical meanings and contextual connotations. I will pay attention to some of these meanings in Cicero, Gabriel Biel and Johannes Reuchlin when they appear to be relevant for Luther’s usage. I will first discuss Luther’s use of the concept in his *First Lectures on the Psalms* (1.). Then I will go through a variety of later texts, dividing Luther’s use of *beneficia* to three thematic areas (2.-4.). It is not possible to discuss all these texts in detail; the larger theological background of God’s beneficial agency can be found in some other recent studies.⁸ In the last part (5.), I will compare Luther with Seneca’s *De beneficiis*, a text often employed by Scholastic and Humanist authors.

1. Favors in *The First Lectures on the Psalms*

Already in Luther’s *First Lectures on the Psalms* (1513-1515, *Dictata*), the term *beneficia* appears frequently. This is significant, because Melancthon does not yet influence Luther’s early use of the concept. However, it should be remembered that the young monk was not only influenced by scholastic authors, but also by the Humanists.⁹ For the most part Luther’s discussions concern God’s favors to humans, and he often focuses on the proper conduct of the giver and the recipient. The heavenly father is characterized in terms of goodness. A truly good (*bonus*) giver bestows favors not only to good and grateful recipients, but also to evil and ungrateful people, rewarding evil with goodness. While an ordinary person of good will (*benignus*) may withdraw an act of favor, the perfectly good giving of God continues to bestow favors to evildoers and unjust people.¹⁰ Beneficial acts are, therefore, different from

⁶ “Favors” in Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); “gifts and services” in Miriam Griffin, “De Beneficiis and Roman Society, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 93 (2003), 92-113.

⁷ So already Seneca, *De beneficiis* 4, 29.

⁸ See Risto Saarinen, *God and the Gift: An Ecumenical Theology of Giving* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2005). Bo Kristian Holm, *Gabe und Geben bei Luther* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006); *Word-Gift-Being: Justification-Economy-Ontology*, eds Bo Kristian Holm and Peter Widmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). *Die Gabe - ein “Urwort” der Theologie?*, ed. Veronica Hoffmann (Frankfurt: Lembeck, 2009). For the cultural history of these phenomena, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000)

⁹ For the Humanist influence, see Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

¹⁰ WA 55/2, 934,1256-1270.

the acts of justice: whereas an act of justice is concerned with the calculation of merits and debts, the divine act of favor is directed to those who are unworthy and do not merit the favor at stake.¹¹

Among human beings favors are rewarded with favors; even heathens can circulate favors in this manner. Contrary to this model of reciprocity, the being of God does not mean receiving good things, but giving them freely and rewarding evil with goodness.¹² To impart favors to another is divine.¹³ In his mercy God “proves himself to be the true God, who wants to give his own to us and be our God, to impart favors to us, to want us for himself, and not to take what is ours, not to have us as his benefactors ...”¹⁴ In this manner God gives *beneficia* but does not receive them.¹⁵

The proper human response to divine favors is characterized by two acts: the human person should receive the favors (*accipere*, *acceptio*) and give thanks (*gratias agere*).¹⁶ In the proper reception of *beneficia* God wants us to “acknowledge Him to be the true God and to confess ourselves to be unrighteous, evil, and foolish in everything that we did not receive from Him and do not acknowledge having received from Him.”¹⁷ In other words, humans grant in this act of *accipere* that they have received all good things from God. This act of receiving is not primarily concerned with free will or the capacity of acting, but it is rather an act of recognition and giving all honor to God:

If He [God] would take anything of ours and not utterly repudiate it, then He would not be the true God nor good alone, because we, too, would contend with Him in favors. But now He wants us to do nothing but receive [*accipiamus*] and Himself to do nothing but give and thus be the true God.¹⁸

Luther elucidates this mode of reception with the help of Ps 116:13: “I will receive the cup of salvation and invoke the name of the Lord.” Receiving God’s beneficial favor in this manner does not mean giving anything back to God in terms of reciprocal retribution. The speaker “receives” the cup and is thankful for what he receives: “Therefore, that I may be altogether thankful, I will even receive the cup, for it is salutary. And lest I trust in myself, I will call on His name ...”¹⁹ Luther underlines the importance of gratitude and giving thanks as an integral part of such reception; thankfulness is already required by the natural law²⁰, but it is also very proper with regard to the spiritual favors of God.²¹

¹¹ WA 55/2, 888, 6-13

¹² WA 55/2, 883, 100-103.

¹³ WA 55/2, 889, 28.

¹⁴ WA 55/2, 889, 25-27. Many, though not all, of my English translations follow *Luther’s Works, American Edition*.

¹⁵ WA 55/1, 114, 12-13.

¹⁶ WA 55/2, 105, 10-14 and 55/1, 660-661.

¹⁷ WA 55/2, 889, 18-21.

¹⁸ WA 55/2, 889, 33-36. Cf. 1 Cor 4:7. For the passivity of *accipere*, see Risto Saarinen, “The Language of Giving in Theology”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52 (2010), 268-301. Typically, Lutheran theologians like Oswald Bayer in his *Freiheit als Antwort* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), employ 1 Cor 4:7 as a motto. See also 5. below.

¹⁹ WA 55/2, 884, 131-132, cf. 119-130.

²⁰ WA 55/2, 401, 509-511.

²¹ WA 55/2, 401, 523-525, 532; cf. WA 55/2, 105, 10-14 and 55/2, 955, 1833-1836.

Already in *Dictata*, we can observe the comprehensive nature of God's *beneficia*. In the natural course of our life, we all receive divine favors daily:

You must see whether you have praised and given thanks to God throughout all the days and hours in your whole life, for you are held to this by a strict commandment and by natural law. For since in all days and hours you have received the favors of God, such as life, being, feeling, mind, besides food and clothing and the service of the sun, of heaven and earth and all the elements in exceeding variety, it is clear that you owe thanks for what you have received.²²

Parallel to these natural gifts we may speak of spiritual favors:

Without ceasing, you receive [*acceperis*] life, feeling, being, understanding, food and clothing in spiritual things, the service of the sun of righteousness, of heaven and earth and of all the benefits of the church. ... And behold, now by another substitution you are being moved away from the favors of God and see your endless omissions, yes, your endlessly endless ingratitude. For at every moment the Lord offers you endless favors. And as you cannot give proper thanks for one morsel of bread, neither can you for one word of truth.²³

As the very nature of true God is to give, it belongs to the nature of God's world that both natural and spiritual things and processes need to be understood as divine favors. In giving these favors, God does not consider the human reaction: a perfectly good giver gives incessantly to all people. At the same time, it is nevertheless important to receive the favors properly and to give thanks. The acts of reception and giving thanks do not constitute any relationship of economic or calculative justice, but they remain the proper ways of reacting to beneficial agency. Ingratitude and ignorance characterize the improper reception of favors.

In addition to these basic features of beneficial agency and proper reception of favors, *Dictata* contains some noteworthy passages in which the concept of *beneficia* is linked with the theme of mercy (*misericordia*). Luther's connection between *beneficia* and mercy is motivated by Johannes Reuchlin's dictionary of Hebrew roots. Reuchlin explains the root *hesed* as follows: "favor, grace or gracefulness. The Septuagint renders this with *eleos*, therefore our translation has everywhere mercy. Ps 89 [:1]: 'I will sing of the Lord's mercies forever.'"²⁴ In keeping with Reuchlin's observations, Luther's reflections on *beneficia* often occur in the context of Psalm verses that contain the word *misericordia*.²⁵

Particularly important in this regard is Luther's explanation of Ps 107:8a "Let them thank the Lord for His mercy" (*Confiteantur Domino misericordie eius*). Here Luther establishes the connection between God's favors and the mercy of God as follows:

... the favors of God in us [*beneficia Dei in nobis*] are by pure mercy and not deserved. Therefore, he [the Psalmist] puts "mercy" first and does not say "our redemption", but "his mercy", for showing that nothing of that was from us, but from God alone. ... If they are the mercies of the Lord, they should give thanks to no one but the Lord. If they do not give thanks to Him, however, they are not His mercies,

²² WA 55/2, 401, 508-514. Cf. also Ps104.

²³ WA 55/2, 401, 518-525.

²⁴ Johannes Reuchlin, *De rudimentis hebraicis libri III* (Reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1974), 185: "Beneficium. Gratia vel graciousitas. lxx eleos interpretati sunt. Unde nostra translatio ubique habet misericordia. Ps. lxxxix. Misericordias domini in eternum cantabo."

²⁵ E.g. WA 55/2, 400-401, 888-889.

and so they are taken away from Him ...²⁶

This conceptual fusion of *beneficia* and *miser cordia* shapes the dynamics of Luther's discussion in at least two ways: on the one hand, God's concrete favors strongly witness of the underlying fundamental intention, will or attitude of God, namely, mercy. The vehicles of God's favor are thus essentially mercy. Even when the person does not acknowledge the favor or mercy bestowed in this person, it witnesses of its giver: "Nevertheless, the mercies in themselves always acknowledge [*confitentur*] the Lord, even though he who has mercy does not acknowledge the Lord, yet another, who sees him having mercy, acknowledges the Lord in these mercies."²⁷ A handsome person, for instance, may not give thanks to God for being handsome, but another person can acknowledge this trait as a work of God. In this sense, the very essence of a particular favor manifests the will of its giver: "God's favors as related to God are pure mercies, for He gives them to us without merit."²⁸ In this sense, the essence of a favor witnesses of its giver.

On the other hand, the understanding of mercy in terms of divine *beneficia* in many ways "reifies" the mercies of God: through the concept of *beneficia*, the mercy of God can be discussed as a gift that is manifest in the recipient. Luther attempts to convey this twofold character of favors through interpreting the word *mirabilia* in Ps 107:8b: "and his wonderful works to the children of men." (*et mirabilia eius filiis hominum*) as referring to such manifestations:

The "wonderful works" and "mercies" are the same, and so, because of the twofold respect, they are mentioned doubly [related to God the favors are pure mercies, see above], ...related to us, the favors are wonderful works. They are wonderful works to the children of men, amazing and admirable to us. For He gives them to us in a wonderful way and produces a result [*effectum*] in a way that we neither could perform or thought nor wanted, but better than we could perform, better than we thought, better than we wanted.²⁹

This "reified" aspect of God's beneficial agency appears as an *effectus*, a fruit³⁰ or gift of this agency. While this gift points to the merciful giver, it also appears as a concrete manifestation related to human reality. Luther underlines that such manifestation is God's action that does not stem from human powers. The *effectus* of a favor, the gift itself, is entirely produced by the beneficial giver. The reified favor is no more the recipient's merit than the underlying mercy to which it points. In this way, "mercies" and "wonders"³¹ remain the two asymmetric aspects of one beneficial agency: as related to God, pure mercy is the primary and constitutive aspect of this favor, whereas its subsequent *effectus*, the fruit of divine agency, is related to human reality.

Already in his first major work, *Dictata super Psalterium*, Luther discusses the concept of favors extensively. His discussion revolves around three interrelated but distinct themes: a) the proper giving and receiving of favors, b) God's natural and spiritual favors, c) favors as expression of God's mercy. I will continue my analysis through dealing with each of these three issues in Luther's later writings in turn. I will for the most part discuss situations in

²⁶ WA 55/2, 831, 62-69.

²⁷ WA 55/2, 831, 81-84.

²⁸ WA 55/2, 832, 94-96.

²⁹ WA 55/2, 832, 94-99.

³⁰ Fructus as beneficium: WA 5, 38, 25.

³¹ For *mirabilia*, the entry *miraculus* etc. in *Sachregister zu WA* is helpful.

which God is the beneficial agent and human beings the recipients. While Luther is also interested in cases of beneficial neighborly love, God remains for him the absolute model of truly beneficial agency. Favors among human beings need, therefore, to be seen in relation to this theological model of perfection.

2. The Proper Giving and Receiving of Favors

To highlight the nature of a favor (*beneficium*), Luther sometimes contrasts it with a sacrifice (*sacrificium*) and, more often, with a duty (*officium*). The first contrast is associated with Mt 9:13: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” In his *Lectures on Minor Prophets* (1524/26), Luther considers that these words of Christ mean that the works of love are favors that take place in mercy.³² In a *Sermon of 1529*, Luther holds that the Lord’s Supper is a favor and a gift given to us. It is not a sacrifice performed by humans as a human work. If we think of eating and drinking in terms of sacrifice, we are making all reception of God’s good things sacrifices and human works. We should not regard such good gifts of God as books, home, fields and money as fruits of our own activity.³³ Such a contrast between sacrifice and gift shows for Luther that the proper reception (*acceptio*) of a gift does not count as problematic human work.

In his *Exposition of Psalm 2* (1532) Luther says that the false sacrifices performed in papal masses are now hidden under divine favor and the true sacrifice is found the work of the theologian who preaches the word of God.³⁴ In a *Sermon of 1539*, Luther teaches that God requires a sacrifice of thanks and gratitude in response to his favors. This gratitude is no work that merits new life, but a testimony of thanksgiving.³⁵ God’s *beneficium* thus leaves no room

³² WA 13, 614, 23-26: “Haec sunt charitatis officia, quae ad omnes pariter pertinent, sicut et Christus: misericordiam volo, non sacrificium. Est autem misericordia beneficium, quo alios demeremur.”

³³ WA 29, 185, 18-32: “...hoc sacramentum esse beneficium et donum nobis donatum et ad edendum bibendumque, ad condonationem peccatorum permissum et traditum. Et ideo crassi et insani sunt homines isti, ut proprii facti nullam neque rationem neque curam habeant. Manducant corpus et bibunt sanguinem Christi et interim pro suo opere et sacrificio pro vivis et defunctis illud habent. Idque hominibus persuadere non verentur. At certe: Si edere et bibere est offerre, quid impediatur, quo non et omnia bona a deo accepta faciamus sacrificium sive oblationem? Donum dei sunt oculi corporis. Si nunc istorum hominum insaniam sequi velimus, negandum nobis esset oculos esse donum dei, sed sacrificium. Pari ratione libros, domum, agrum, pecuniam et quicquid possides, non donum dei, sed oblationem esse affirmare poteris. Et quamvis suis ipsorum verbis agnoscant et fateantur, quod scilicet accipiant corpus et sanguinem domini edentes et bibentes, perstant tamen in sua impietate et nullomodo ab hoc abusu avocari aut avelli possunt.”

³⁴ WA 40/2, 194, 21-28: “[Theologus] ... ipsi Deo in coelis gratissimum offert sacrificium, et vere vocatur atque est altissimi Sacerdos. Totum enim hoc, quod Theologus in Ecclesia agit, pertinet ad noticiam Dei propagandam et ad salutem hominum. Cum igitur divino beneficio sublatae sint abominationes impii sacrificii Papistarum, missas dico, quas solas impius Papa cum suis Doctoribus sacrificii nomine ornavit, cumque restitutus nunc sit verus cultus, nempe praedicatio verbi Dei, quo et vere cognoscitur Deus et ornatur.”

³⁵ WA 47, 837, 38-41: “Deus requirit hoc Sacrificium pro omnibus beneficiis suis, scilicet gratitudinem et gratiarum actionem, non ut inde accipiamus vitam, sed ut testemur

for the autonomous performance of sacrificial works by humans. However, this does not mean that the whole concept of sacrifice is abandoned; the concept is transformed into a heteronomous response of thanksgiving. Sacrifice thus becomes an expression of the virtue of gratitude, the virtue of proper receiving of favors.

The primacy of God's beneficial agency vis-à-vis human works is also highlighted in the relationship between favors and duties. The different meanings of *beneficium* and *officium* are discussed since antiquity: (1) while duties are performed as morally necessary actions, favors express a greater degree of voluntary spontaneity.³⁶ In canonical literature, we also find a special use of the two terms: (2) an ecclesiastical office gives the person the right to have some benefits. In that sense "benefits are given because of the duty" (*beneficia datur propter officium*), as Gabriel Biel formulates the traditional canonical doctrine.³⁷ While in (2) favors are conditioned by duties, they remain unconditional in (1). Luther was familiar with both (1) and (2). In order to understand his view clearly, one needs to see that he sometimes alludes to (2), while in other cases he has (1) in mind.

In some cases, Luther is merely quoting Biel's formulation.³⁸ A more interesting case of (2) appears in disputation *De veste nuptiali* (1537) in which the opponent claims that Christ requires some duties in exchange for the benefits of salvation. In that sense there is allegedly some reciprocal economy in salvation. Luther replies, however, that God does not require faith, baptism or any other human contribution in the sense of duty or work conditioning God's favor. All subsequent human activity is done for the sake of certainty and as a sign of gratitude.³⁹ Thus, Biel's canonical formulation cannot be applied to God's favors.

The argument of *De veste nuptiali* shows that the general contrast between duties and favors, as expressed in (1), is also theologically adequate, as this contrast highlights the difference between faith and works. A well-known example of (1) appears in Luther's *Treatise on New Testament* (1520) in which Luther says that the mass expresses God's favor, not any such human work or merit that stems from duty.⁴⁰ In this text, Luther also uses another classical distinction that underlines the difference of faith and works. After concluding that the mass is, fundamentally, a testament and sacrament in which God gives us grace and mercy, Luther continues:

For a testament is not *beneficium acceptum, sed datum*, it does not take benefit from us, but brings benefit to us. Who has ever heard that he who receives an inheritance has done a good work? He simply takes for himself a benefit. Likewise, in the mass we give nothing to Christ, but only receive from him; unless they are willing to call this a good work, that a person sits still and lets himself to be benefited...⁴¹

gratum animum pro beneficiis Dei, ut sic omnia opera nostra fiant sacrificia gratiarum actionis."

³⁶ Cicero, *De officiis* 1, 47-57; Seneca, *De beneficiis* 3, 18-28.

³⁷ Gabriel Biel, *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarum IV/2*, d15 q8 a1 n.2, ed. W. Werbeck (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977), 144, 21.

³⁸ WA 30/2, 316, 6-7; 38, 164, 28.

³⁹ WA 39/1, 300, 4-11.

⁴⁰ WA 6, 365, 10-11: "hie nit officium, sed beneficium, keyn werck odder dienst, sondern allein genieß und gewinst".

⁴¹ WA 6, 364, 19-25: "ein testament ist nit beneficium acceptum, sed datum, es nympt nit wolthat von uns, sondern bringt uns wolthat. Wer hat yhe gehort, das der ein gutt werck thue, der ein testament empfehet? Er nympt woll zu sich ein wolthat. Also auch yn der

The difference between giving and receiving favors is a classical distinction. In his *De officiis* (off 1, 48), Cicero says that the arts of giving and returning a favor belong to generosity. The counterpart of generosity is the art of dealing with received favors (*beneficia accepta*). This art can be of different kinds, depending on the giver's intention and other circumstances (off 1, 49). In Cicero's discussion, the reception process is active and manifests the virtues of the recipient. Luther, however, uses the distinction in a straightforward manner: in the sacrament, Christians are dealing with the favor that God gives. God is not receiving anything from us, but we receive from God, and our reception is passive (*still helt*).

The proper giving and receiving of favors is thus characterized by various contrasts that all highlight the nature of the favor as free gift and the passivity of the recipient. Beneficial agency differs from the sacrificial practices and the performance of duties, since in both a reciprocal exchange of "works" is required. The true favors of God are given without any requirement of a human activity. It is true that these favors need to be "received", but there are no elaborate requirements for a proper reception of favors. The reception should take place in a state of passivity, sitting still and letting oneself to be benefited (*lest ym wohltun*). This basic message belongs, obviously, to the essential insights of Reformation theology, stressing the justification of the sinner by faith alone. Much of this basic message is already present in the *Dictata*, but its contrasts to *sacrificium* and *officium* belong to the mature phase of Luther's teaching career.

If God's beneficial agency is unconditional, it also follows that God acts beneficially towards all people, irrespectively of their responses. In his *Sermons on Exodus* (1524/27), Luther compares God to an inexhaustible fountain from which favors flow continuously, also to the ungrateful and the impious.⁴² In *Against Latomus* (1521) Luther even says that God pours his gifts over the impious more abundantly than over the pious, demonstrating that the gift is radically beneficial and not meant as a reward.⁴³ The goodness of such agency is, therefore, not dependent on the recipient but it is defined entirely by the character of the giver. The ideal giver distributes favors without any regard on the merits of the recipient.

The ideal recipient is characterized by his or her passivity. This does not, however, rule out gratitude. In his *Second Lectures on the Psalms* (1519/21), Luther describes the gratitude and joy with which the recipient reacts. The favor received is referred to the benefactor in gratitude. Like Cicero, Luther here compares the grateful recipient to the cultivated field that gives back much more than it receives.⁴⁴ In this manner, gratitude does not mean quietism. Sometimes Luther can also say that the recipient has certainty or certain knowledge because

meß geben wir Christo nichts, sondern nehmen nur von yhm, man wolt den das ein gutt werck heyssen, das ein mensch still helt und lest ym wolthun ..." (LW 35, 93)

⁴² WA 16, 640, 2-10.

⁴³ StA 2, 491, 1-5.

⁴⁴ WA 5, 181, 12-19: "Sufficit vel opinari, hoc praesens gaudii genus pertinere ad affectum gratitudinis, quo in benefactorem grati et iucundi rapimur, de cuius dono laetati sumus, qua gratitudine iucundi sumus benefactori eiusque votis respondemus, sicut ager laetus suo cultori. Et hoc ita esse videtur eo signo intelligi, quod in versus initio verbum absolute dicitur 'Et laetabuntur', hic vero 'Et laetabuntur in te', ut priore verbo sensum beneficii absolute indicet, posteriore vero, acceptum beneficium referri in benefactorem cum iucunda gratitudine." Cf. Cicero, *De officiis* 1, 48.

of beneficial divine agency.⁴⁵ Passivity, gratitude and certainty thus complement one another in describing the proper attitude of the recipient. While gratitude, a classical virtue of the recipient, is already prominent in the early lectures, certainty is emphasized in Luther's late writings.

3. God's Earthly and Spiritual Favors

The listing of God's different *beneficia*, begun already in *Dictata*, is repeated and developed in Luther's later writings. In a *Sermon of 1534*, Luther connects the theme of seeing (Lk 10:23-24) with divine favors. These favors are visible and audible to all people, but we remain blind and tedious and do not express our joy and gratitude because of them.⁴⁶ The good things of creation lay before our eyes, and the word of God is preached. These favors of Christ should wake up people to a life of gratitude, but we remain tedious and do not grasp what we have, hear and see.⁴⁷

Our body and its parts, like eyes, nose and ears are all beneficial gifts of Christ. The eye is particularly valuable: once blinded, a person would pay great sums to recover the eyesight.⁴⁸ People ought to think that good eyes are given by God and be thankful for them. Likewise, property, fields, cattle, money, different things for eating and drinking are God's gifts. We should feel and taste these favors of Christ, appreciating them properly.⁴⁹ We should hope that God gives us good eyes and ears to recognize his favors and be grateful for them. Even godly people realize this only seldom, and impious people do not listen to the word of God and cannot recognize his favors.⁵⁰

Although this listing of favors bears much resemblance to the above-mentioned list in *Dictata*, we may note that the natural and the spiritual are not separated. Seeing and hearing together enable us to regard the world and our body as God's favors. Through hearing, we receive the word of God that interprets the creation in this manner. While seeing pertains to visible and natural things, it is a special skill to see the world in the light of this theological interpretation. The natural realm is thus also spiritual: it witnesses of God's gifts and gives us

⁴⁵ WA 43, 366, 3-5; 43, 561, 34; 39/1, 300, 9-11.

⁴⁶ WA 37, 527, 1-11.

⁴⁷ WA 37, 527, 23-33.

⁴⁸ WA 37, 527, 34 - 528, 3: "Darnach sind wir noch erger, wenn wir solten allein bedencken, was uns Christus fur guter am leib gibt, scilicet gesunde augen, nasen, orhen et totum corpus, quis posset pretium horum beneficiorum satis aestimare? Mancher erfert nicht eher, quam praetiosum donum sit integer oculus, denn es verderbe im denn oder keme sonst drumb, denn gebe er gern viel, viel geltes drumb, quod posset recuperare &c."

⁴⁹ WA 37, 528, 4-12: "Wie viel leute denken, das sie es von unserm herr Gott haben, quot gratias ei agunt pro isto praeclaro dono Ja das sie es so tieff bedechten, das es Gottes gabe sey, Nec agnoscunt esse dei beneficia, donum, possessiones, agros, Wir haben vihe, gelt, gut, wir gebrauchen unser guter, essen und trincken davon, noch sollen wir nicht fulen noch greiffen, das wirs von unserm herr Gott haben, Darumb sind wir recht aussetzig und fuehlen nichts, Wo das fleisch vom aussatz zufressen ist, fuelet es nichts, Sic nos contrectamus manibus beneficia Christi et sentimus, das sie uns wol schmecken, sed non agnoscimus ea obvenire nobis a deo."

⁵⁰ WA 37, 528, 12-19.

reason to be thankful.

Luther does not, however, abandon the distinction between natural and spiritual favors but mentions it often in his later writings. The spiritual favors can refer to conscience and peace of heart, while external favors are related to the matters of politics.⁵¹ In an *Exposition of Psalm 147* (1529/32), Luther connects this distinction with a longer list of different divine favors. The word “praise” in this psalm refers to the thankfulness to God for all his favors to his people.⁵²

In the verse “he strengthens” (Ps 147:13 in current counting), the psalm first speaks of those beneficial acts of God which concern external life. God does not merely strengthen with iron, but with his own power. He also wants us to be active in this work.⁵³ Next, in the verse “he blesses your children” God speaks of the education of children. Then, in the verse “he grants peace within your borders”, God moves from the realm of household to the greater realm of the state.⁵⁴ Finally, the verse “he fills you etc.” speaks of daily bread and agricultural blessings. With his favors, God fills all our needs. We enjoy them, but we should also praise God and show our gratitude. In sum, God grants peace, defends us against enemies, blesses the fields and gives all favors needed in the household and the state.⁵⁵

In addition to these earthly favors, God grants many spiritual favors. First, there is the gospel. As ungrateful people forget to thank for the earthly favors, they forget to give thanks for this greatest benefit of God. Among the spiritual favors are God’s word, promises, and the right worship.⁵⁶ Although the spiritual favors are here mentioned separately, it is clear that the earthly favors are also theological and spiritual in the sense that they witness of God and should incite gratitude towards God. All favors are thus related to gratitude and the love of God in a fundamentally similar manner.

The best-known and most influential list of earthly and spiritual favors appears in the exposition of the Creed in the *Large Catechism*. In the first article, an extensive list of God’s earthly favors is formulated as follows:

[God) has given me and constantly sustains my body, soul and life, my members great and small, all my senses, my reason and understanding, and the like; my food and drink, clothing, nourishment, spouse and children, servants, house and farm, etc. Besides, he makes all creation help provide the benefits and necessities of life - sun, moon, and stars in the heavens; day and night; air, fire, water, the earth and all that it yields and brings forth; birds, fish, animals, grain, and all sorts of produce. Moreover, he gives all physical and temporal blessings - good government, peace, security. Thus, we learn from this article that none of us has life - or anything else that has been mentioned here or can be mentioned - from ourselves.⁵⁷

In the Latin text of the *Catechism*, these realities are called “received favors” and “free gifts”

⁵¹ WA 31/2, 645, 30-33.

⁵² WA 31/1, 543, 28-30.

⁵³ WA 31/1, 543, 31-544, 4.

⁵⁴ WA 31/1, 544, 5-10.

⁵⁵ WA 31/1, 544, 11-17. Cf. the short list of books, home, fields and money in WA 29, 185, 28 (quoted above).

⁵⁶ WA 31/1, 545, 24-30.

⁵⁷ BSLK, 648, 13-30. This and the following translations from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb & Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), here: 432-433.

which deserve our permanent gratitude.⁵⁸ A continuous meditation of God's rich giving can bring about a "gratitude to God and a desire to use all these blessings to his glory and praise".⁵⁹

Scholars have pointed out that Luther's whole exposition of the Creed proceeds in terms of divine giving.⁶⁰ Within this comprehensive structure of giving, all items of creation are to be seen as God's favors. The exposition of the second article continues this list with the description of spiritual goods: "Here we get to know the second person of the Godhead, and we see what we have from God over and above the temporal goods mentioned above, namely, how he has given himself completely to us, withholding nothing."⁶¹ The exposition does not, however, contain any longer list of spiritual favors, but it explains what it means to have Christ as Lord. Luther summarizes his exposition of the creed with saying that "the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts".⁶²

Although the second and the third article relate to spiritual benefits, the distinction between earthly and spiritual remains, finally, secondary, as all three modes of giving are concerned with the knowledge of our existence in terms of God's favors. More important than the distinction between earthly and spiritual is to regard all that we have, visible and invisible, earthly and spiritual, as given by God. Thus, we are constantly dependant on divine *beneficia* in all daily undertakings. Receiving these favors in proper gratitude remains the right attitude of a Christian.

4. Favors as God's Mercy

As in *Dictata*, Luther employs in his *Lectures on Romans* (1515/16) Reuchlin's Hebrew dictionary to clarify certain words. To Rom 9:15 Luther remarks that God's "having mercy" in Hebrew (*hanan*) relates primarily to the manner of showing mercy: God donates his *beneficium* or gift in this act. The Hebrew *hanan* thus means "the grace of favor" or "the free gift".⁶³ Although the view of the proximity of *gratia* and *donum* is taken from Reuchlin, Luther's emphasis on the beneficial manner (*modus*) of showing mercy is here original. Luther also points out here that it is possible to display acts of pity without the *modus* of positive beneficialness, as Rom 9:15b in his view claims.⁶⁴ The true mercy of God, rooted in

⁵⁸ BSLK 649, 11-17: "... nos debere ... laudibus extollere agendis gratiis acceptorum beneficiorum esse memores et, ut uno verbo dicam, illi prorsus atque per omnia hisce gratuito datis muneribus servire ..."

⁵⁹ BSLK 650, 19-21.

⁶⁰ So already Martin Seils, "Die Sache Luthers", *Lutherjahrbuch* 52 (1985), 64-80 and Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede*, 2. Aufl. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 80-108.

⁶¹ BSLK 651, 10-15.

⁶² BSLK 661, 40-42.

⁶³ WA 56, 397, 23-398, 3: "Notandum ergo, Quod in Hebreo 'Misereor' primo loco positum significat eo modo misereri, Vt beneficium Vel donum gratuitum donet, qui miseretur, quod fit etiam in eum, qui non offendit Vel peccavit, Sed tantum eguit et pauper est. Vnde 'Hannan' (Hebreo misertus) 'beneficium donavit' significat. Inde Hanna i. e. gratia beneficium, donum gratuitum et Iohannan Seu Iohannes greca terminatione." - See Reuchlin, *De rudimentis*, 182 and the editorial remarks in the WA.

⁶⁴ WA 56, 398, 4-7: "'Ignoscere' autem, seu 'miserabor' significat 'remittere' et 'ignoscere', quod etiam sine beneficio fieri potest in eum, qui reus et offensor est. Vt Quando

biblical Hebrew, is, however, beneficial.

In his *Second Lectures on the Psalms*, Luther continues the theme of praising God because of his favors and mercy. To Ps12:6 he points out that one should rejoice in heart because of the merciful deeds of the divine benefactor.⁶⁵ In his *Lecture on First Timothy* (1528), Luther takes up the connections between the Hebrew *hesed*, the Greek *eleos* and the Latin *beneficium* and *miserecordia*. For Luther, true favors express mercy, not a sacrifice or some other economic exchange. The Hebrew word *hesed* does not speak of servile favors, but of the truly beneficial agency of Christ. God's beneficial agency remains free, and a person who receives God's favor is justified. In this manner, true favors manifest God's mercy.⁶⁶

The importance of the Hebrew term *hesed* remains a recurring theme through Luther's entire career. In late *Lectures on Genesis* (1535-1545), Luther teaches that mercy means *beneficium*. The Hebrew *hesed* means neighborly love and beneficial agency towards the neighbor. In this manner, God donates his favors and mercy.⁶⁷ When *hesed* means *beneficium*, it comprises both God's favorable grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁸ With *hesed*, God gives the Spirit into the human heart, so that we can have consolation from this gift and become strong and sanctified.⁶⁹ This internal gift can even radiate to the external

Deus remittit inferni penam et peccatum, miseratur, Quando dat gratiam et celorum regnum, miseretur."

⁶⁵ WA 5, 391, 6-13: "Qui impii doctores his pestibus doctrinae suae extinguunt exultationem cordis [Mi 2:9] et suavitatem dei in hominibus et auferunt laudem eius, sicut Mich. ij. dicit 'Mulieres populi mei eiecistis de domo deliciarum suarum', idest de conscientia exultante in salutari dulcis misericordiae dei, 'et laudem meam tulistis a parvulis earum imperpetuum'. Stat sententia omnium hominum more quoque firmata, eos in benefactore laetari, cantare, benedicere, qui se gratis adiutos intellexerint, quod quanto magis in deo praestandum est, ut intelligamus et faciamus."

⁶⁶ WA 26, 105, 17-23: "Ibi Paulus simul interpretatur Ebraica voce: Chesed, non loquitur de beneficio servili sed Christi: 'beneficii' [Mt 12:7] i. e. misericordiae vel gratiae. Matth. XII: 'Misericordiam volo' i. e. beneficium volo. Beneficium est misericordia vel opus impensum fratri. Greci transtulerunt misericordiam Grece Eleemosynen, germanice wolthat, sacerdotes avari almosen reddiderunt. Chasid: factus beneficus, qui libenter bene facit, vel accepto beneficio a deo est iustificatus. Hoc simul in Paulo."

⁶⁷ WA 44, 84, 3-7: "Misericordia ipsum beneficium vel beneficentiam significat, ut in Mattheo [Hos 6:6] loquitur Christus ex Hosea: 'Misericordiam volo, non sacrificium'. Hasid, significat utrunque, qui diligit proximum et benefacit ei, et cui bene fit, qui a Deo donatur multis misericordiis et beneficiis. Ita ergo dicit Iacob: Misericordiae tuae et beneficiorum tuorum erga me non est numerus."

⁶⁸ WA 44, 374, 5-9: "CHESSED, hoc est, beneficium, donum, gratia, misericordia. Non est [1 Tim 6:2] Chanan, sed Chesid, unde Chasid. Paulus exponit beneficium. 1. Timothei 6. qui beneficii participes sunt. Non solum favorem aut gratiam significat, sed etiam donum spiritus sancti, Gratia enim sola non sentitur, sed oportet accedere donum."

⁶⁹ WA 44, 374, 13-19: "Haec est totalis et maxima consolatio, quod Deus respicit et inclinatur ad ipsum donum suum, hoc est, inspirat spiritum fortitudinis, consilii, Macht ein festen, starcken, lebendigen heyligen auß jm, Vivificat enim in media morte, mortificat in ipsa damnatione, ut cor eius possit statuere: Ut ut saeviat in me herus, tamen non moriar, virtus et fama mea non peribit. Haec loquitur Chesed sive spiritus in cor eius, ut non habeat cogitationes inferni aut mortis, sed vitae et tranquillitatis."

person, so that he can receive approval in the eyes of others, as is said of Joseph in Gn 39:21. In this manner, the “internal” grace of the Holy Spirit can become “external” so that the person is received with approval in the eyes of others (*favor passivus*).⁷⁰

The intimate connection between mercy and favors appears in many variations. In *Lectures on Isaiah* (1528/31), Luther defines mercy as divine favor that comprises the forgiveness of sins and the donation of the Holy Spirit.⁷¹ In a *Sermon of 1530*, Luther says that mercy means grace, favors or good works. This mercy has two dimensions: God’s mercy first meets us, and this can be called grace or *wolthat*. The second dimension is operative in our love of neighbor. In Hebrew, this neighborly love and help can also be called grace.⁷²

Given all these intimate connections between mercy, favors, grace and gift it would be artificial to understand all these concepts as referring to separate, successive events. *Beneficia* and *wolthaten* rather depict the comprehensive merciful turning of God towards human and the neighborly love between humans. This event consists of both the intentional attitude (*favor, misericordia, gratia*) and the effective deed with its product (*actio, opus, donum*). Luther’s emphasis in describing this event lies in its fundamental intention, that is, that the truly good works of God and humans receive their constitutive meaning from the underlying intention of mercifulness or beneficialness. Although the gift belongs to this event, it is primarily the mercy of God, which characterizes his beneficial agency. In this sense, the intention or the attitude has a logical priority over the gift.

Since the relationship between grace and gift has often been debated in Luther studies⁷³, I should add that the texts on *beneficia* discussed above do not indicate any clear changes in Luther’s understanding of the relationship between *gratia* and *donum* over the years. The texts give a stable picture in which *beneficia* remains the central interpretative concept of God’s work in both creation and redemption. A more extensive and exhaustive study would, however, be necessary in order to confirm or to rule out possible differences between the younger and the older Luther. Our study only argues that there is a stable conceptual basis in Luther’s use of the term *beneficia*. When justification is described with the help of the vocabulary of *gratia/favor* and *donum*, one needs to proceed from the common basis of merciful *beneficia* towards possible differentiations. As actions generally differ from events because of the presupposed intentionality of the agent, God’s agency is constituted by the underlying intention rather than the external manifestation or the effect produced. In this very

⁷⁰ WA 44, 374, 28-38.

⁷¹ WA 31/2, 106, 8-9: “Misericordia est divinum beneficium, favor remissio peccatorum et spiritus sanctus donatus.”

⁷² WA 32, 107, 3-10: “So sage ich nu, das barmhertzigkeit heisse so viel als gnade oder wolthat odder ein gutes werck, wie man es wil nennen, Die selbige ist nu zweyerley: Die erste ist die barmhertzigkeit die uns widderferet von Gott, die heisset man sonst Gottes gnade odder wolthat, Die ander aber die wir gegen unserm nehesten haben, nicht gegen Gott, sondern einer gegen dem andern, das ich dem der es darff, einen rock, ein lehen, ein huelff oder rat gebe, das heist auff Ebraisch ein gnade. Die zwey stücke mus man lernen, und wer sie kan, der lesst darnach opffern und ander narrenwerck wol anstehen.”

⁷³ See Reinhard Flogaus, “Luther versus Melancthon? Zur Frage der Einheit der Wittenbergere Reformation in der Rechtfertigungslehre”, *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 91 (2000), 6-46, and Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Justification and Participation in Christ: The Development of the Lutheran Doctrine of Justification from Luther to the Formula of Concord (1580)* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

basic sense, intentions have a logical priority over the deed and its effect. The logical priority of God's intention, expressed theologically as *favor*, *gratia* or *misericordia*, may nevertheless also have its background in some traditional views of *beneficia* to which we now turn.

5. Comparison with Seneca's *De Beneficiis*

Seneca's *De beneficiis*, (*On Favors*, *ben*) is a comprehensive treatise on beneficial agency. It was widely used through the medieval and early modern period. In his *Summa theologiae* II/2 q106-107, Thomas Aquinas builds his discussion on giving and receiving gifts on Seneca's work. Erasmus of Rotterdam edited and published Seneca's works in Basel in 1515. He quotes Seneca's thoughts on gratitude (*ben* 2, 24, 1) in the *Preface* of his *Greek New Testament*⁷⁴. Luther quotes Seneca only seldom and we cannot identify any immediate quotes from *De beneficiis* in Luther's works. Luther mentions Cicero more often and it can be, as we have already seen, that some of his views regarding duties and favors stem from Cicero's *De officiis* 1, 48-49.

Seneca's treatise can nevertheless be regarded as an established and comprehensive codification of the prevailing intellectual rules and opinions concerning beneficial agency.⁷⁵ In Luther's times, almsgiving, charity and mutual aid were strong practices, which were not only regulated by the immediate social conventions but also by the established intellectual doctrines concerning these practices. Although the existing practices cannot be immediately derived from the intellectual doctrines, we can argue that both Luther and his educated readers were familiar with the prevailing doctrines. Even when they were not necessarily aware that all this could actually be found in Seneca, they approved the established guidelines concerning mutual aid, gratitude and other duties between the different members of the society.

Moreover, divine giving is for Seneca a paradigm of truly beneficial agency. Human benefactors should imitate the model of divine giving. This feature of *De beneficiis* connects Seneca's program with Christian views of doing favors. At the same time, we cannot assume that the early modern Christians were simply following Seneca's views. In order to see Luther's standpoint as clearly as possible, it is instructive to compare his three main points - proper giving and receiving, earthly vs. spiritual, merciful intention - with similar themes in Seneca.

(1.) Seneca emphasizes that truly beneficial agency is constituted and defined by the will and mind of the giver. Neither the gift itself nor its use by the recipient is constitutive of the favor, but only the good intention and will of the giver. True favors, therefore, take place in the mind, and even when the vehicle of the favor, the gift or service, is lost, the favor

⁷⁴ Erasmus, "In Novum Testamentum Praefationes", in: *Studienausgabe* 3 (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1967), here: 80-83.

⁷⁵ The excellent new English translation in Seneca, *Moral and Political*, does not include the sixth and seventh books. A complete text is found in Seneca, *Moral Essays III*, LCL 310 (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1935). For introductory information about the significance of this work, see Francois-Regis Chaumartin, *Le De beneficiis de Senèque, sa signification philosophique, politique et sociale* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1985); Griffin, "De Beneficiis" and Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Gift-Giving and Friendship: Seneca and Paul in Romans 1-8 on the Logic of God's charis and Its Human Response", *Harvard Theological Review* 101 (2008), 15-44.

remains, because it is constituted by the giver's good will. (ben 1, 5 and 6, 2, 1-3). Because of this basic criterion, favors need to be intentionally given. We cannot receive favors from trees and rivers, although they are advantageous for us. Only targeted intentional giving can qualify as favor. (ben 4, 29, 3 and 6, 7, 3). In a normal case, it is proper to receive favors with gratitude. But this is not a constitutive criterion. In some cases, favors can be received without knowing or even unwillingly. Parental education with discipline, for instance, can be regarded as beneficial agency even when the child remains ignorant and unwilling. Gods also act favorably upon humans who are ignorant and even resist divine gifts (ben 6, 23-24 and 7, 31). The major message of *De beneficiis* is that "man's ingratitude should never incite (and cannot justify) the abandonment of giving".⁷⁶

Beneficial agency differs fundamentally from the economic exchange of buying and selling. Although the recipient should show gratitude and return favors, this reciprocity remains different from the economic exchange. A person has already paid back the favor when he has cheerfully accepted it. The giver receives gratitude (*gratia*) in return, not a concrete payment. A favor is paid in one way, a loan in another: the transaction of beneficial agency takes place in the minds (*inter animos*) of the giver and the recipient (ben 2, 33-34). In Seneca's use, the verb *accipio* means such reception or acceptance in which the recipient remains passive. An exaggerated activity in receiving favors turns gratitude into a payment, thus spoiling it.

Like Cicero, Seneca discusses the difference between favors and duties. Because beneficial agency is constituted in the mind of the giver, people can do favors both to their superiors and to their inferiors, both to their relatives and to strangers. The difference between favors and duties is not given by social context, but it is constituted by the will and mindset of the giver (ben 3, 18). Seneca teaches an asymmetry between giving and receiving a favor: while the giver needs to show his or her good will in an intentional and targeted manner, favors can be received passively or even with resistance. Divine giving exemplifies this particularly well:

like the best of parents, who only smile at the spiteful words of their children, the gods do not cease to heap their benefits upon those who are doubtful about the source of benefits, but distribute their blessings among the nations and peoples ... ever gentle and kindly, bear with the errors of our feeble spirits. Let us imitate them; let us give, even if many of our gifts have been given in vain ... as a good farmer overcomes the sterility of his ground by care and cultivation, I shall be victor. (ben 7, 31-32)

When Luther claims that favors are to be distinguished from sacrifices and duties, he is not saying anything particularly original. Seneca's example shows that the bestowal and circulation of favors differs fundamentally from the economic exchange, which proceeds with payments. In addition, the view that the divine giver distributes favors to all people stems from Seneca. Both Cicero and Seneca distinguish favors carefully from duties. The requirement of proper gratitude also stems from these authors. More importantly, the passivity of the recipient and the unconditional nature of the gift given are likewise characteristic of Seneca's discussion on favors. The recipient can sit still and let him be benefited; he can even resist favors bestowed upon him, so that only the giver's persistent care and cultivation transforms him into a worthy recipient. Although active reciprocity is to

⁷⁶ So Griffin, "De beneficiis", 103, quoting Brad Inwood, "Politics and Paradox in Seneca's *De beneficiis*", in A. Laks and M. Schofield (eds), *Justice and Generosity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 263.

be commended, it is no conceptual requirement of *beneficia*. Favors require a good-willed giver, but the recipient can remain passive. In these ways Luther's discussion on the proper giving and receiving of favors does not differ dramatically from Seneca's treatment.

(2.) Concerning the distinction between earthly and spiritual favors, the first thing to notice is that both Luther and Seneca provide detailed lists of different favors. The long list given in ben 4, 5-7 is particularly interesting in comparison with Luther's lists in *The Large Catechism* and elsewhere. Seneca holds here that God gives us at least the following *beneficia*: "countless things that beguile your eyes, your ears, your mind", such as trees bearing fruit, wholesome herbs, food in so many varieties, living creatures of every kind, rivers that gird the plains, channels, warm waters on the sea-shore, earth with its mines, gold, silver, copper, iron, huge residence for all humans under the sky, its ceiling gleaming in one way by night, in another by day, breath that you draw, light, blood, delicacies, stimulants of pleasure and the repose in which you wither, animal herds, music and other arts, and, finally, the different ages of human beings. If someone claims that nature bestows these things upon me, Seneca responds that such person is only giving a different name for god.

Another list appears in ben 7, 31; here Seneca says that gods "sprinkle the lands with timely rains, they stir the seas with their blasts, they mark off the seasons by the course of the stars, they modify the extremes of summer and winter by interposing periods of milder temperature". Remarkable in both lists is the interpretation of natural or earthly things as intentionally targeted divine favors. When Luther speaks of sun, heaven, earth and the different times and seasons, he is on the one hand drafting a theology of creation. At the same time, he continues the old tradition of seeing the cosmic events as divine favors.

Both Seneca and Luther speak emphatically of the body and its senses in this context. The senses act as mediators between the mind and external goods. While Luther as Christian probably proceeds more strongly towards the spiritual gifts, divine favors do not remain merely external for Seneca but they affect the mind through senses. He considers that "it is God, our teacher, who draws forth our genius (*ingenia*) from the hidden depths" (ben 4, 6). The lists of earthly favors remain similar, both authors interpreting the different necessities of bodily life in terms of *beneficia*. We may thus conclude that Luther's lists of God's concrete favors contain several traditional topics. Although they are also motivated by such biblical sources as Ps 104, they display some striking similarities with Seneca's lists.

(3.) In comparison with Seneca's discussion, the theme of mercy as the essence of God's favors may be the most original and innovative part of Luther's treatment of *beneficia*. Luther clearly takes the topic of *miser cordia* from the Bible, applying his knowledge of Hebrew to prove his views. Luther scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the theme of merciful God is particularly prominent in Luther and in some of his late medieval predecessors.⁷⁷ The comprehensive nature of God's mercy unites the theological themes of grace, favor and gift in a systematic manner. God's *beneficia* manifest his mercy, and the manifestation of this mercy is the central message of the gospel in Jesus Christ. The intimate connection between favors and mercy thus serves Luther's own theological purposes.

Without denying the theological primacy of these considerations, we can find some parallels between Luther and Seneca also in this issue. The parallels can be seen in Seneca's fundamental claim that the good will or the mind of the giver is constitutive for all *beneficia*.

⁷⁷ See David Steinmetz, *Miser cordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), and Berndt Hamm, *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

A favor is “an act of benevolence” (*benevola actio*, ben 1, 6). This means that favors remain even when the material gift is lost, because the good will of the giver cannot be taken away. Seneca can also maintain that, for the benevolent agent, “the only thing to keep your eyes on is the good faith of your recipient” (*solam accipientis fidem specta*, ben 3, 14, 2). With regard to the benevolent divine giver, we are loved by the Father Liber (ben 4, 5; 4, 8) so that

God confers on us the greatest and most important favors without any thought of return. He has no need for anything to be conferred, nor could we confer anything to him. Doing a favor is, therefore, something to be chosen for its own sake. The one advantage to be considered is that of the recipient, and we should approach it by putting aside any interests of our own. (ben 4, 9).

This benevolent attitude of Seneca’s divine agent is not identical with the mercy of the Christian God. However, it is remarkable that Seneca’s God practices beneficial agency without any thought of return. Doing a favor is very different from the acts of economic exchange in which merits and rewards are expected. It would of course be wrong to say that Seneca prefigures the Lutheran doctrine of grace without merits. But it may be correct to maintain that Luther highlights the theme of *beneficia* because he finds there support for his own theology of faith and grace. Given that Luther’s educated audience was familiar with the classical discussion on favors, this discussion offered for Luther a conceptual starting-point and an illustration of his theological doctrine of justification by grace alone. The theological doctrine cannot be reduced to Seneca’s philosophical discussion, but its many points, such as the non-interested nature of favors, the distinction between favors and duties, the alleged passivity of the recipient and the priority of intention over the concrete gift or service, can illustrate the Christian doctrine from various angles.

We could say that Luther performs a certain “Christianization” of the ancient topic of giving and receiving favors. When the ancient theme of non-interested giving is seen from the perspective of sinfulness and mercy, it becomes Christianized. Unlike Seneca and many others, Luther considers that truly altruistic giving is impossible for sinful human nature. But the paradigm of altruistic giving can still be found in the biblical witness of God who gives his *beneficia* to all humans. Because of sin, this paradigm is accompanied with the theological aspects of grace and mercy. Nevertheless, as merciful giving the paradigm of God’s giving in many ways resembles the non-interested bestowal of favors in Cicero and Seneca. To use Scott Hendrix’s picture, the “vineyard” of genuine help and altruistic agency was already available in the ancient discussion on favors. However, it needed “recultivation” in order to be understood in a properly Christian manner.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).